

BRAINSTORM

BY JACOBA ATLAS

Two years ago Douglas Trumbull had reason to be optimistic about his future: after ten years of false starts and unkept promises, he was less than two weeks away from completing his first feature film since 1971's *Silent Running*. His film, titled *Brainstorm*, dealt with thought transference to video tape and the re-experiencing of someone's life and death.

Then tragedy struck. Natalie Wood, co-starring with Christopher Walken and Louise Fletcher, drowned while vacationing off Catalina Island. The death of the forty-three year old actress was sad enough, but then MGM turned personal loss into corporate battle: the executives at MGM announced there was no way for Trumbull to complete his movie as intended, and they pulled the plug on the production. What the studio wanted, instead of a movie which could play in theaters, was a quick insurance pay-off. "I knew if this film didn't come out I'd never direct another movie. I was fighting for my life."

In a way MGM was also fighting for its corporate life. The company was mired in astronomical debts and a cash pay-off from an insurance company looked soothing. Trumbull now says his only ally during this time was the insurance carrier, Lloyds of London.

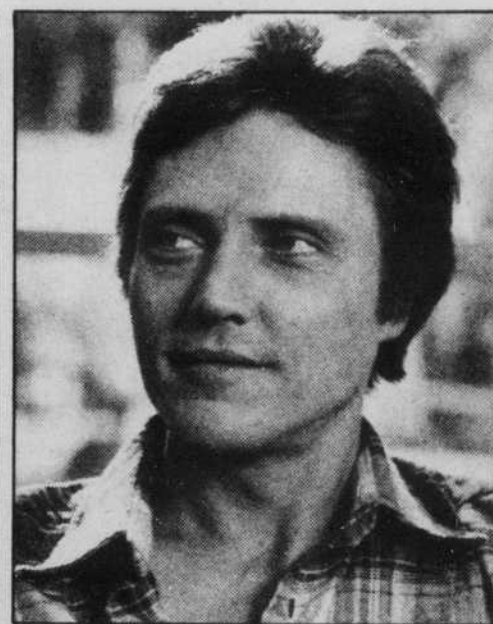
"I showed them [Lloyds] the movie and explained what still needed to be shot. I always said that Natalie's crucial scenes were completed. There were some minor bits of business and one scene I had re-written for her which originally belonged to another character, but nothing that couldn't be eliminated or re-scripted. Lloyds of London listened to me, looked at what I had shot and said the movie could be finished."

Trumbull insists no one seeing the movie will suspect that Wood had not finished her role as originally planned. "If she had died just one day earlier in the shooting schedule I wouldn't have been able to finish my film. The last day I worked with her we shot a crucial scene—the one in the laboratory where her husband (Walken) records her thoughts about him on tape—thoughts that are very hostile. He then replays that tape and learns what went wrong with their marriage and is able to patch things up. Without that scene I wouldn't have had a movie."

Trumbull ultimately dedicated *Brainstorm* to Natalie.

Today, as Trumbull's movie is about to reach the public, not one of the executives who wanted to shelve *Brainstorm* is still at the studio. A whole new regime is calling the shots and is supporting the film.

Trumbull is no stranger to the vicissitudes of the movie business. Born and raised in Los Angeles, the son of a painter and an inventor (his father works for special effects rival John Dykstra), Trumbull became a technical illustrator while at college and later worked for the Navy and Air Force making movies. By the time he was 23 he was working full time for director Stanley Kubrick who had seen a Trumbull-conceived short called *To the Moon and Beyond*. Kubrick was then assembling a special effects team which would make movie



Brainstorm star Natalie Wood, whose crucial thought-transference scenes were completed the day before she drowned. Christopher Walken (*The Deer Hunter*, *Pennies from Heaven*) plays her scientist-husband who develops a unique method of transferring experience. Director Douglas Trumbull (above right) with actress Louise Fletcher and a mad jumble of technology; Trumbull is a renowned special effects innovator, but he insists that the story is most important.

First the Star Died. Then the Studio Wanted to Kill the Picture. But Director & Special Effects Wizard Doug Trumbull Persisted. "I'm an Optimist about the Future; I Think It'll Be Just Like Today."



history. The film they created was *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

"I spent 2-1/2 years in London working for Stanley," Trumbull recalls. The experience remains unique. "We had no budget for special effects—Stanley simply told us to come up with whatever we wanted and to take the time and spend the money needed to make it work on the screen." MGM, which financed *2001*, would tear out its corporate hair on the cost overruns, but Kubrick had his dancing planets. Incredibly, Kubrick worked without storyboard or pre-planned shots, the kind of preparation that is considered basic to the next generation of filmmakers, Lucas and Spielberg.

Trumbull returned from London still on the rosy side of thirty with a yen to direct. In the early Seventies movie companies were desperate to embrace the "youth culture" (remember *Easy Rider*?) and Trumbull was given a chance to direct by Universal's Ned Tanen, the man who would later greenlight *American Graffiti* and say no to *Star Wars*.

Silent Running, which starred Bruce Dern in his first non-maniac role, was about preserving greenery in a polluted universe and featured three adorable robots nicknamed Huey, Dewey and Louie, an idea later embraced in part by both *Star Wars* and *E.T.* *Silent Running*, however, was not a box-office success. Trumbull announced several other

pending movies, but none got off the ground. Trumbull supported himself and advanced movie experimentation with his Entertainment Effects Group, a special effects house which, along with Dykstra's Apogee and George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic, represents the state of the art in effects. EEG's projects have included *Close Encounters*, *Star Trek the Motion Picture* and *Blade Runner*.

"I no longer get all that involved in doing effects for other people. With Kubrick I was into everything and a real pain in the neck. With Spielberg on *Close Encounters* it was the same. I was never isolated, I always felt part of the whole." Now Trumbull tends to let others on his staff work out the details.

Although Trumbull is known primarily as an effects expert, he insists that what matters in movies is the story. *Brainstorm* is about people: scientists, who except for their brave new world visions, are just like everyone else—trying to make a marriage work, trying to raise a son, trying to understand and come to terms with death. It's that transference to tape of the "death experience" of scientist Louise Fletcher that makes up the climax of *Brainstorm*.

Trumbull based his images on the work done by psychologists Stanislav and Christina

Grof, who study near-death experiences and have a theory that our lives are lived in response to our birth experiences. "They say we relive that trauma throughout our lives and the way we face a crisis relates all the way back to the way we were born."

"How to do that sequence took up a major part of our debate on the film," confides Trumbull. "When to cut back to Walken and when to stay with a point of view of the death trip. I didn't want the trip to overpower the character. *Brainstorm* was to me always a film about people, about the human experience, so I wanted to keep cutting to Walken to force you to deal with his character and not just go along for the ride."

The temptation to do otherwise must have been enormous. Much of *Brainstorm's* power comes from the special visual effects that pull us into the movie and keep us gasping. Because the tapes recreate experience, Trumbull packs his movie with cinematic joy-rides that put us—almost literally—in the drivers seat. Roller coaster, jet planes flying through space, sexual hijinks. "We do the fun stuff in the film because it seems so real; then when we go inside the brain that will also seem real."

"I wanted the sequences when we go inside the brain to be superior technically to the rest of the film. In other movies, when you go into a character's mind in a flashback or whatever it's black and white or fuzzy or in some way less than the rest of the film; with *Brainstorm* it's just the opposite."

A M P E R S A N D